

Major Thien and The Fall of Saigon

By Mr. Aaron Bougourd



Major Thien on left, his niece, Hong Nguyen in sunglasses

Major Ly Kim Thien was born the 22nd of August 1945 in the village of Tan Phuoc in Go Cong Province, South Vietnam. He was educated at Petrus Ky in Saigon. In 1964 he decided to follow in his older brother's footsteps and joined the South Vietnamese Air Force (SVNAF). Thien's family had strong government connections; his father was a Security Administration official, his brother was a Lieutenant Colonel in the SVNAF, and his brother-in-law, Pham Van Nhan, was chief of police of one of the districts of Saigon.

Tien was commissioned as an officer of the Republic of Vietnam Air Force in 1964. After completing officer training at Nah Trang Air Training Center, he was assigned to the 1st Air Division and stationed at Da Nang Air Base from 1966-68, where he served as section chief of a ground transportation squadron under the 4th USAF Advisory Team. Members of this team included Major Martin and MSgt. O'Donnell. Ground transportation units of the 4th USAF Advisory Team were charged with the service and maintenance of all airfield ground equipment such as fire-fighting equipment and vehicles used to transport ordinance from ships in port to aircraft.

In 1968 Thien was assigned to the 2nd Air Division based at Nha Trang, and served in progressive leadership roles as Deputy-Chief of the General Service Squadron and then Deputy-Chief of the Transportation

Squadron /Ground equipment maintenance. After additional training in accounting and commissary management, Thien was assigned as Chief of the 2nd Air Division Base Exchange. He worked closely with members of USAF Advisory Team 6; team members that he remembers include Captains Freeze and Dugan and Major Wilson. Tien received in-country USAF training in programs and planning in ground equipment maintenance for the F5E fighter. In 1974 he attended the Squadron Officer's School (SOS) at Tan Son Nhut, where he underwent 4 months training and study in international communist political theory and organization. He was promoted to captain in 1970 and was awaiting his scheduled promotion to major when the South collapsed.

The 2nd Air Division evacuated Nha Trang in March 1975. Falling back to Tan Son Nhut airbase in Saigon, Thien's brother, Lt. Colonel Son, arranged for the evacuation of his family from Nha Trang to join him in Saigon. Thien's Squadron was ordered to stand at Tan Son Nhut, but the planned air evacuation of airmen's families to Con Son Island on the 29th April was thwarted when the base came under heavy rocket attack.

Major Thien remembers the last days leading up to the fall of Saigon as if it was just a week ago. His family was staying in the SOS Officer's Barracks with no news of what was going to happen. On the night of the 26th of April 1975 Major Thien decided to go to the former HQ compound of General Westmorland to see if any aircraft were going to be sent to evacuate the families of officers and airmen. At 7:30 pm a USMC helicopter landed full of marines in new combat uniforms. The marines told Thien he could not enter the compound, but Tien produced his ID card and told the marine officer he was on duty and that he had orders to go to the compound, so the marines let him pass. Thien did not realize that this would be the last Americans he would see in Vietnam.

When Thien finally gained access to the compound he could not believe his eyes; it was complete chaos. Officers and men were discarding their weapons and uniforms en masse. Unable to get any information on plans to evacuate, he returned to his family in the SOS Barracks. On the night of the 28th of April at 8.30 PM the base commander gave the order to "Secure the base,"

and that "Everyone must stand and fight. Anyone attempting to enter the base should be shot." Thien helped man floodlights on the perimeter and at 2 am on the morning of the 29th the base came under heavy mortar, rocket, and small arms fire.

Later that day, Thien witnessed a bomb blast near his family. Seeing this and realizing the situation was hopeless and that all of the senior officers were gone, Thien made his way to his family in the SOS barracks. He was stopped on the way by a friend in the Air force Security Police who gave him an M16 and wished him good luck. Thien made it back to his family and moved them to a trench near the perimeter of the base. When the time was right, they escaped.

After the fall of Saigon, Thien was sent to a communist reeducation camp, where he was tortured and forced to denounce his anti-communist beliefs. In 1994 he escaped Vietnam on foot through Cambodia and on to Thailand where to this day he is a refugee.

I have known Thien for 6 months now and he has been through hell. Thien is still proud of his service alongside the Americans in Vietnam. I work as a volunteer with an organization that is helping Thien and I am proud to call him my friend.



Aaron Bourourd and Major Thien